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Adult education

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A. Caswell Ellis

ADULT EDUCATION

ITS RÔLE IN OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND A FEW OF ITS PROBLEMS

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE MEETING OF THE
ASSOCIATION OF URBAN UNIVERSITIES, IN
PITTSBURGH, NOVEMBER 4, 1927

BY

A. CASWELL ELLIS, PH.D.

DIRECTOR OF CLEVELAND COLEGE
WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

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Box 362

CLEVELAND, OHIO
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR
1927

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ADULT EDUCATION

THIS morning I wish first to give briefly the reasons which impel me to two rather sweeping conclusions about our educational system. Then I shall point out a few of what seem to me to be the major problems in adult education that are crying aloud now for our study.

The first of these conclusions is that our present plan of putting nearly all of our educational efforts upon children and youths is wasteful, inefficient, and unsound psychologically. It will never provide us with a citizenry capable of solving our complicated social, civic, economic, and religious problems.

The second is that we can hope to master our present unsolved problems of civilization and maintain progress only by an adequate system of education for both children and adults—an educational system that continues throughout life, and utilizes more fully the motives aroused and needs felt in the actual processes of intelligent living.

First: Is our present system of education really efficient? The following incident may throw some light upon this question. Not long ago I was taking in my car to a high school of considerable repute a teacher of history and a young high-school girl. The teacher stopped at a professor's home to pick up some magazines that she wished to use with her history class. She and the professor stood at the door looking into the magazines and discussing something with obvious interest and animation; whereupon the high-school girl, in the car with me, remarked: "What in the world do you suppose they are so interested in?" I replied: "The professor is giving her some articles on the League of Nations for your

class. Probably they are discussing that subject. Aren't you interested in the League of Nations?" "Well, I could get along very well without it," she replied. I afterwards repeated this remark to the teacher, who said: "Yes, that is the attitude of about four out of five of our students toward nearly all that we teach them. In each class there are three or four real joys, who want to know everything and love to study; but the great majority of the students just get up what we give them from force of habit, fear of not passing, desire to get a good grade, or for some other extraneous reason."

This is no exceptional situation. You know as well as I do that most college boys are glad to take a holiday upon the slightest provocation—and provide the provocation themselves, when possible. It is the very rare professor who can be delayed five minutes in reaching his classroom and not find his students gone.

Time and again this year professors from noted day colleges in Cleveland have said to me, in speaking of their night teaching of adults at Cleveland College: "What a relief it is to get hold of a class that really want what you are giving them." I am sure that you know only too well the blasé, *nil admirare*, "fed-up" attitude of the average college student.

Children enter the first grade of our schools usually with great enthusiasm for learning, and for several years are eager to acquire the reading and writing and other elementary studies—knowledge and skill that they at once begin to use in their daily lives. Pretty soon the school subjects far outrun their life experiences and their present life needs. Then the whole course of study becomes a more or less purposeless routine to them, and we teachers have to fall back upon grades, prizes, punishments, quizzes, written exercises, attempted schoolroom imitations of life situations, and various other devices to induce the children to study. By the time

the high school is reached, the situation is bad; and, before the college is finished, about ninety-eight per cent have dropped out. The remaining two per cent, with a few notable exceptions, are more interested in fraternities, athletics, and other side shows than they are in the main educational circus. We constantly marvel at their lack of enthusiasm for study, their lack of a sense of values, and their infantile interest in nonessentials.

But we ought not to wonder, if we know anything about physiology or psychology. Can't you recall how you have gone to the seashore with great enthusiasm for fresh fish, but, after you have eaten it for two or three meals a day for about three days, you almost grow sick at even the smell of a cooking fish? We have taken charge of these children, kept them largely away from the essential civic, social, and economic realities of life, and tried to cram into them in twenty consecutive years all the knowledge they will ever need and much that they never will need—giving them the answers to questions that have never arisen in their lives, teaching them the solutions of problems that they have not yet met, preparing them for opportunities of the existence of which they are utterly unaware.

This educational folly is based in part upon two ancient fundamental psychological notions, both of which have recently been shown to be false: the first is that children learn more easily than adults, and the second is that, if you teach the child now what he will need later, he will have this ready when the need arises.

Emminghaus, Jones, and others have shown time and again that the minute you finish learning a thing you begin to forget it, and that, if you do not use it very soon after learning it, you will not have it at all when you need it later. Jones showed that seventy-five per cent of even the more important things learned in class by school children are gone within three months. Those of us who try to recall the

boundaries of all the states that we bounded in the grammar school and all the details of history and geometry that we learned in high school and all the wisdom of our freshman year, know that a few years later it is about 99.44 per cent gone, unless we have occasionally revived it by use. The most economical time to learn anything is just before you are going to use it. Attempting to learn it five or ten years ahead is largely a waste of time.

More recently Thorndike has proved, likewise, that adults at any age tested by him (he tested them up to forty-five years of age) learn practically anything, not less rapidly, but more rapidly than do children of the same native ability at any age up to twenty. The experience of the adult colleges shows the same thing. In Cleveland College, for example, during the past year, there were 1,366 registrations by former college students who had left their colleges before graduation. Presumably these college drops would not be above the average of college ability; yet here as adults only four per cent failed, and seventy-five per cent passed with an average grade of B. The others either did not want credit for the course, and hence did not take the examinations, or withdrew for some reason, usually a good one, during the term. In short, men and women as adults are better students than they were as college boys and girls.

It is proved that childhood and youth have no monopoly on ability to learn easily. It is equally obvious that about nine-tenths of all the knowledge that we attempt to pile up in children many years before it is needed by them is lost before they get the opportunity to use it. It is also clear that our process of continuous cramming for twenty years breeds in most children an indifference to learning and a lack of a sense of reality. Then, such a process is wrong and ought to be changed.

The child should not be continuously immured within school walls, but should be given more experience of actual

life before he tires of his school, and should continue to have his periods of schooling alternate with experience of life's needs and demands as long as he lives. Grundtvig, President Morgan of Antioch, and Dean Schneider of Cincinnati have advanced a real idea, but even they have not carried it far enough.

There is another consideration that likewise makes universal adult education an absolute essential. The processes of civilization have become so complex and new knowledge is being added so rapidly each year in every field that it is imperative that education continue throughout life. Not only are chemistry, physics, and geology being applied to the processes of production, but the principles of statistics, of psychology, and of the social sciences are being applied to both production and distribution with constantly increasing thoroughness. Even the work of government is using the physical, mathematical, and social sciences to an extent that would surprise most of us who croak so constantly and so ignorantly about our government. The uneducated merchants and manufacturers are going out of business on every side through the bankruptcy door, and the ignorant mayors are giving place to the educated city managers just about as rapidly as we can educate men for the positions.

Even the college graduate has acquired a fair knowledge of only the one or two related fields in which he specialized, with overpowering ignorance of nearly everything else. And ten years after graduation, if he has not kept up his studies, he is out of date even in his specialty.

It seems clear that education is a lifelong process for each of us, on which we need all the help we can get from expert teachers all our lives. The college for adults is a necessity for the college graduate as well as for the unfortunate men and women who were denied educational opportunity in their youth.

Again, as the period of life from twenty-one to sixty is

many times as long as the usual college period from seventeen to twenty-one, and as there are many, many times as many adults needing college education as there are boys and girls of college age and caliber, it is obvious that the colleges for adults must soon assume an importance by no means second to that of colleges for youths.

If, then, colleges for adults are to assume so responsible a rôle in our educational system, it is high time that they be given the most careful study, in order to determine the correct aims, principles, materials, and methods for them. Let us see now how far we have progressed toward an answer to these fundamental questions about adult education.

A cursory study of the literature, a limited attendance upon meetings, and a rather wide series of conferences with those who might be presumed to be leaders, have left me with the feeling that no one has yet given the part-time college for adults the serious study that it needs. Those with whom I have talked seem to be thinking of little more than of how to sell to adults the courses and processes we have already developed in our day colleges for youths, plus such business courses and, in some cases, such intellectual vaudeville as will help out the college exchequer. This excessive sensitivity to budgetry considerations is not surprising, as in most cases the night college for adults has been forced to pay its entire expenses out of fees, and in many cases has even been run as a financial venture to help support the day college.

Coming into the field of adult college education just a year ago, with no special knowledge of the subject, with no prejudices or preconceptions, I can not escape the distinct impression, after a year of experience and very intensive study, that thus far we have little more than played, almost trifled, with the problems of adult education. The contributions of the Carnegie Corporation, of Joseph Hart, and of our Danish and English colleagues are a notable beginning, but only a

bare beginning. I do not believe it will be very different until adult part-time education has a reasonable measure of the same support that daytime education for youths now has, so that a much larger number of able men and women can be attracted to the field, freed from the excessive urgency of present budgetry considerations, and given the leisure and equipment needed for study and experimentation.

In the meantime, those of us who must carry on, whether we know how to do so or not, will have to do the best we can.

Let me now present for your consideration a few of what seem to me to be the most essential problems before those of us in charge of colleges for adults.

The first need seems to be an analysis of the nature and the needs of those whom we are to serve. Who are the people we should minister to and what do they need? As I see it, there are three rather distinct large groups.

First, there is a group of boys and girls from sixteen to twenty-one years of age, graduates of high schools, who are able to think on the college level, but must work during the day for a living, and hence can attend only the adult part-time college. What should be done to these boys and girls before they leave high school to inspire them to continue their education and to inform them with regard to the best means of doing so? We do this much in high schools now for the college preparatory group, but neglect to prepare for the future education of the group that must go to work at once. Next, after we get them into the night college, do they need merely the same studies and treatment that are given the boys and girls who go to the day college? What shall we do with their physical development; what with their social and religious development? These are only a few of the unsolved problems of this youthful group.

The next large group is from twenty-one to forty-five or fifty years of age—young men and women building homes, earning livings, rearing families, making careers, developing

a nation and a civilization. Here is the great bulk of our population. What do the men and women who can think on the college level here want and need? My observation is that the glibness with which one answers that question is usually in direct proportion to his fundamental ignorance. I certainly can not answer that question, nor have I thus far seen any evidence that any one else yet can. What we are doing now, in the main, is dumping upon these mature, earnest men and women, seriously seeking answers to very definite troubles and problems and yearnings in their daily life, courses composed largely of masses of generalizations and abstract ideas on this or that academic subject, gathered and organized not at all with a view to solving the problems of these people, but with a view to giving to youths a well-rounded presentation of some academic division of knowledge.

Let me illustrate one aspect of this difficulty from experience. A group of men wanted a course in machine design. I called into use the professor, the laboratory, and the course in machine design in a noted local day technical college, and offered this course to these men. But the course as given required calculus as a prerequisite, and only two of the dozen or so men who needed the course had studied calculus. Now, the calculus course was longer and harder than the course in machine design. The professor and class were both disappointed, and ready to give up. It occurred to me to ask the professor how much of the calculus one would be obliged to understand in order to master the machine-design course as he gave it. "Oh," he said, "very little." Then I asked him how long it would take him to teach those earnest men the few aspects of calculus that they must have. He thought he could get them to understand each one as they needed it in a few hours. Then I asked him if he would mind trying to give his machine-design course to this group, and to give along with it at the necessary places the limited knowledge of calculus needed to handle the machine-design problem at

hand. Being a very able and somewhat unconventional college professor, he tried it, and the course has worked out entirely satisfactory to him and to the class.

Similarly, a mother is having trouble with the tantrums of her child, or with his nutrition or growth, or with his mental complexes. She can not stop to get full typical college courses in the psychology of the emotions, in psychoanalysis, in principles of nutrition, in biology, and in physiology. Some aspects of all of these subjects are involved in her problems, but most of the material in the standard college courses is not necessary for her purpose or her needs. So, we induced a group of experts in each of these specialties to comb out of the bewildering mass of details in these several fields just those facts and principles that the average non-expert parent needs and can use. This material was organized into a series of courses which we call "Parental Education"—courses that cut across our academic subject lines and do violence to traditional academic ideas of thoroughness, but that give to parents usable knowledge on the college level of priceless value. Last term one hundred and sixty-seven took these courses, and this term more than two hundred are taking them, with great satisfaction to themselves and to their teachers.

This may not be the best kind of solution of this problem, but certainly there is some solution to the problem of securing the kind of semivocational courses the people need in that group from twenty-one to forty-five years of age who are carrying on the work of the world. With their problems, motives, needs, and background experience so radically different from those of the college boy and girl, it is just absurd to offer them exactly the same courses that we give boys and girls, and teach them by the same methods. Yet, we college men have nearly always done this kind of thing. A few hundred years ago, when it was decided that education should not be the special privilege of the small group of professional

men only, the school men immediately began to teach peasants the Latin and Greek that had been the studies of the professional classes.

Not only is there need for new college-grade vocational courses, but we sorely need better general culture courses for adults. This need is the more urgent as we have almost no general culture courses any more in the day colleges. Most of the so-called general culture courses there, are really taught in a professional or pre-professional way. Courses in the classics, for example, are in the main professional courses which tend to prepare one to teach the classics, rather than to awaken in laymen an appreciation of the contributions of Greece and Rome to civilization. Courses in biology or chemistry are in fact taught as a preparation for medicine or for becoming an expert in, or a teacher of, one of the subjects. Instead of giving mainly the important facts and the far-reaching general principles in the field that have a bearing upon our lives—the things that the intelligent layman, who never expects to be an expert in the field, wants to know—the usual college introductory course is full of details and technic that only the future expert needs or desires. Chicago, Columbia, and other colleges are trying to work out these general survey courses on the college-boy level. We need to work them out on the adult level also for those with the adult background, needs, and motives. We have a new plan for doing this, but there is not time to give it here.

There is special need for survey courses and other types of culture courses for adults here in America, where we have so much leisure and so much money, with so little idea of what to do with either. We can not hope to lessen the mad rush for sensation and vulgar display until we educate our population for the wise use of leisure. There is need for an entirely new set of courses for adults on the joys of life: courses that will teach the enjoyment of nature, of science, of music, of art, of literature, of travel, of collecting, and so on and on.

This does not begin to describe the subject matter needs of this great middle period of life, but I hope it at least shows that there are vast needs here as yet unmet by our colleges for adults.

Then, there is a third group to be ministered to by the adult college: the men and women above forty-five or fifty years of age. Until quite recently, this was a very small group. Now, with our knowledge of sanitation, balanced rations, vitamins, the draining of focal infections, and other wonders of modern science, there is no reason why the great mass of people may not be more sound at eighty than they were a generation ago at fifty.

By the time they are fifty, women have completed their great reproductive function, their children usually are grown, their homekeeping duties are eased up, and they are confronted often with a dreary prospect of having no occupation worthy of their mettle. Men, similarly, by fifty or fifty-five, have usually reached their goals in the business or professional world; and, with the stimulation to struggle and the joy of new conquest largely over, there is great danger that life may lose its zest. Many men at this period wish to lighten their burden of work, and to take up some form of culture or social service. That men and women at this age may make the highest contributions to civilization has been proved time and again, even before the era of modern sanitation, dietetics, and medicine. Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Goethe, and many others did their most notable work between the ages of fifty-four and eighty-three. Goethe completed *Faust* at eighty-three, Defoe did not begin writing till about sixty, and Thomas Hardy is writing when past ninety. President Eliot wrote and published a hundred and ninety-two articles and books between his eightieth and ninetieth birthdays. Judge Gary piloted the great United States Steel Corporation to success when long past seventy-five. Clemenceau led an almost defeated France to victory when

seventy-seven, and von Hindenburg at eighty is managing successfully as President the desperate problems confronting the German Republic. These cases could be multiplied almost indefinitely. To give new direction and wiser, richer content to the lives of men and women of fifty or more, especially to prepare them to direct more wisely their efforts to use their wealth and talents for the good of mankind, is indeed a great field of service for the college for adults. But here also we have done little or nothing to meet the need.

Parallel with this problem of developing subject-matter are the problems of methods of teaching, of principles, of aims, of organization, of finance, and so on. There remains time to consider very briefly only two aspects of the problem of the methods of teaching adults. Thus far, adults are being taught pretty much as we teach youths, with, in some cases, a little more of discussion allowed.

I do not know what methods will finally prove best, but I am sure that there are at least two problems of method that must be solved better than we now solve them. First, we must develop a method that will not attempt to force every one in a class to go at the same rate, regardless of age, experience, previous training, leisure, or ambition, as the usual college method now does. We are trying out at Cleveland College this year in two experimental sections a method which has some of the features of the Dalton plan and some of the Burk-Winnetka plan, that seems, at least partially, to meet this problem of allowing each member of the class to work up to his ability without losing the many advantages of some class lecture and class discussion.

There is also tremendous need for improving our technic of class discussion so that well-trained college professors may discuss with their classes the important social, religious, and economic problems that confront them without getting themselves dismissed. Our college *ex-cathedra* type of lecture and our catch-as-catch-can method of discussion prevent at

present the frank study of many of the things that adults most need to study.

Undoubtedly hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent upon adult education during the next fifty years. The only way to prevent a large part of this from being wasted by stupid copying of our day colleges for youths and by unchecked experiments is to provide at once adequate scientifically checked experimentation to develop wisely planned courses and methods for adult colleges. Here is an unequalled opportunity for our great foundations and our men of wealth to make a large contribution to civilization by providing the means for such study and experimentation.

My time is up. I have accomplished my purpose if I have succeeded in bringing us to realize more keenly two things: first, the dominant rôle that adult education must play in the future; and, second, the very fundamental problems that remain unsolved on every side, for the solution of which we can not look to the standard day college, but must depend upon careful observation and analysis of our facts, followed by scientifically checked educational experimentation.

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